

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 30 December 2020

Today I want to begin with the good news: the approval of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine which is a fantastic achievement for British science

And which will allow us to vaccinate more people, and also vaccinate them more quickly.

And there is one important development that's helping us to accelerate our vaccination programme across the whole of the UK:

We've had new advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation that the first dose can protect people against the worst effects of this virus

because the benefits kick in after two or three weeks.

And so from now on we will give a first dose to as many vulnerable people as possible,

with the second dose to follow twelve weeks later.

And what that means is we can vaccinate and protect many more people in the coming weeks.

I know everyone watching this will want to know when you can get your vaccine and all I want to say is we are working as hard and as fast as we can to get the supplies to you, and as soon as we have the supplies we will be getting them into people's arms

To summarise where we are

We have to face the fact we've got two big things happening at once in our fight against Covid –

One is working for us; and one working against us.

On the plus side we have two valid vaccines and we are racing, as I say, to get them out.

On the downside, there is a new strain of the virus which is spreading much faster and surging across the country.

And we have seen a 40 per cent increase in cases in England in the last week alone,

almost 15 per cent more patients in hospital – more than at the peak of the first wave.

And yesterday sadly we recorded almost a thousand deaths across the UK, for the first time since April.

So at this critical moment with the prospect of freedom within reach

We've got to redouble our efforts to contain the virus.

That's why the Health Secretary has announced that more areas of England will be moving into Tier 4 from tomorrow

And as I say again, no-one regrets these measures more bitterly than I do.

But we must take firm action now

and that's why we have to think very hard about schools.

Because today of course it remains the case that keeping children in education is a national priority

it remains the case that schools are safe.

But we must face the reality that the sheer pace of the spread of this new variant

requires us now to take even tougher action in some areas and that does affect schools

Let me set out for you what this means.

In most of England, primary schools will still reassemble next week, as planned for the new term.

But, in the areas we have just published today on gov.uk,

I am afraid the start of the new term will be delayed until at least January 18,

when the latest data on those infection rates will be reviewed.

That is because the rate of transmission in these areas is so high,

and there's just such pressure on the local NHS,

that extra action is required to control the spread of the virus.

The children of key workers, or those who are considered to be vulnerable, will still go back to primary schools from next week – wherever they live in England.

They are not affected by today's announcement.

In secondary schools, all vulnerable children and the children of critical workers will go back next week across England, as originally planned.

But we will ask exam year pupils in secondary schools to learn remotely during the first week of term

and return to the classroom from 11 January.

The remaining secondary school pupils, i.e. non exam groups will go back a week later, that is from 18 January – but I want to stress that depending on the spread of the disease it may be necessary to take further action in their cases as well, in as I say the worst affected areas.

To minimise disruption in schools and to fight the disease we are massively expanding our testing operation

ensuring that every secondary school pupil is tested as they return, and regularly thereafter.

Again I want to thank the teachers, pupils and parents who have worked so hard to keep schools safe and keep them open.

We are also asking universities to reduce the number of students who return to campus in January, prioritising medical courses and others requiring face to face teaching.

And in all cases, students should be offered two rapid tests when they return.

All of these measures are in the end designed to save lives and to protect the NHS.

And for that very reason,

I must ask you to follow the rules where you live tomorrow night

and see in the New Year safely at home.

That means not meeting up with friends or family indoors, unless they are in the same household or support bubble,

and avoiding large gatherings of any kind.

We are still in the tunnel of this pandemic

the light however is not merely visible:

thanks to an extraordinary feat of British engineering if you like

the tunnel has been shortened

and we are moving faster through it, and that gives me great confidence about the future in the Spring

So for now let's double our efforts, let's follow the rules,
protect our NHS
and together make 2021 the year we leave this tunnel behind us.

Rail replacement vehicles: extension of non-accessible period, 30 September 2021

If you use assistive technology (such as a screen reader) and need a version of this document in a more accessible format, please email webmasterdft@dft.gov.uk. Please tell us what format you need. It will help us if you say what assistive technology you use.

School contingency plans to be implemented as cases rise

The government has today, Wednesday 30 December, responded to rapidly rising case rates due to the new, more transmissible variant of coronavirus by triggering the [education contingency framework](#) and pushing back the staggered return for secondary schools and colleges by one week.

Covid case rates are rapidly rising across the country and from tomorrow 78 per cent of the population will be in Tier 4. Between 18 and 24 December the weekly case rate in England rose to 402.6 per 100,000, a 32 per cent increase on the previous week.

In response to this concerning data, and to suppress the spread of the virus, protect public health and save lives, the contingency framework for education, first published in November, will be implemented in areas of the country with very high rates of incidence or transmission of the virus.

Where the contingency framework is implemented, secondary schools and further education colleges should only allow vulnerable children, children of critical workers, and exam students to attend. High-quality remote education should be provided for all other pupils.

The framework includes the option to move primary schools to remote education

should rates of incidence or transmission of the virus in a local area require it. Evidence suggests that transmission is limited between young children, and the decision to close primary schools will be based on higher thresholds than for secondary schools and colleges and will only be taken as a last resort. Early years will remain open nationally, as will alternative provision and special schools.

Escalation of areas into the contingency framework for education will be decided through the existing Local Action Committee and COVID Operations Committee structure, and will be communicated alongside Tier decisions. This process will be led by the Health Secretary and Education Secretary.

In areas not subject to the contingency framework, early years, primary schools, alternative provision and special schools will all return to face-to-face education from the start of term as planned, with individual special schools having some flexibility.

Evidence shows the new strain of COVID-19 is increasing in the South West, Midlands and parts of the North West. The majority of the cases identified in London, the South East and the East of England are of the new variant. Infection rates have increased faster than expected in these areas where the new strain has been circulating and stronger measures are required to get the virus under control.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

In the face of a rapidly changing situation, I am determined to act to preserve lives and the NHS, as we continue to protect education and put children first.

We are making changes to the start of term to give more time for the rollout of our first-of-its-kind rapid testing programme to identify students who have the virus but don't display any symptoms. On top of the existing protective measures in place, this will help keep education settings as safe as possible for all students.

The fact that we have kept education running so successfully throughout the entire pandemic is due to the incredible dedication of all our teachers, leaders and support staff and I want to thank them once more for everything they continue to do to keep children learning as safely as possible.

During the first week of spring term, beginning on or just after 04 January, secondary schools and colleges will focus on the rollout of rapid testing to help find asymptomatic cases. The provision of testing builds on the extensive protective measures already in place in schools and colleges to make them as safe as possible.

Secondary schools and colleges will continue with a staggered return but with one week's delay, providing face-to-face education for exam year groups from

11 January and the return of all students on 18 January. Vocational exams scheduled for the first weeks of January will go ahead as planned.

To support high quality remote education during this period, the government expects to deliver over 50,000 laptops and tablets to schools across the country on Monday 4 January, and over 100,000 in total during the first week of term. Over 1 million devices will be provided in total.

For universities, the courses where students are eligible to return in early January have been further restricted, prioritising medical and other courses where face to face teaching is necessary, to reduce the number of students travelling over this period. The wider return of students currently planned for the two-week period beginning 25 January will be kept under review.

All university students should be offered two rapid tests when they return.

The current plans for rapid testing in secondary schools and colleges remain in place, with two rapid tests available to all secondary and college students and staff at the start of term to identify asymptomatic cases.

The first starter packs of up to 1,000 test kits will arrive at all secondary schools and colleges on 04 January. The 1,500 military personnel committed to supporting secondary schools and colleges remain in place, providing virtual training advice and guidance on establishing the testing process with teams on standby to provide in-person support if required.

Daily testing of all staff and students that have been a close contact of a confirmed case, reducing the need for self-isolation, will continue to be available to all secondary schools and colleges from the first week of term, along with weekly rapid tests for all staff in secondary schools, colleges, special schools and alternative provision.

All students and staff are encouraged to consent to testing. Testing for primary school staff will follow in the second half of January.

The rollout of laptops and tablets to schools on this scale follows close collaboration between the government and its partner organisations, which has seen over 560,000 devices delivered to schools and councils since the start of the pandemic. With the further rollout this term, over one million will be provided in total – making the programme one of the largest of its kind in the world.

[Education Secretary sets out school contingency plans for England](#)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding our

plans for bringing children back to school this academic term.

Dealing with this pandemic has always been an exercise in managing risk. Throughout, we have been adamant that the education of children is an absolute priority, and that keeping schools open is uppermost in our plans.

The magnificent efforts of all the leaders, teachers and staff in all of our schools, colleges have ensured that settings are as safe and COVID-19 secure as possible but we must always act swiftly when circumstances change. The evidence about the new Covid variant and rising infection rates have required some immediate adjustment to our plans for the new term.

This is of course a rapidly shifting situation but some things remain constant: we continue to act to preserve lives and the NHS and we continue to protect education by putting children first. Above all our response is proportionate to the risk at hand and makes every use of the contingency framework that we put in place earlier this year.

The latest study we have from Public Health England is that Covid infections among children are triggered by changes in the community rate.

The study also says that the wider impact of school closures on children's development would be significant. I am quite clear that we must continue to do all we can to keep children in school.

Taking all these factors into account means we have had to make a number of changes for the new term in order to help with breaking chains of transmission and to assist with keeping our all of our children and all of our education settings as safe as we can.

The fact that we have managed to do this so successfully throughout the entire pandemic is due to the incredible dedication of all our teachers, leaders and support staff and I know that the House will join me once more in thanking them for everything they continue to do to keep children learning as safely as possible.

Accordingly, we will be opening the majority of primary schools, as planned, on Monday 4th January.

We know how vitally important it is for younger children to be in school for their education, well-being and wider development. In a small number of areas, where the infection rates are highest, we will implement our existing contingency framework such that only vulnerable children and children of critical workers will attend face to face. We will publish this list of areas today on the gov.uk website.

I would like to emphasise that this is being used only as a last resort – this is not all tier 4 areas – and that the overwhelming majority of primary schools will open as planned on Monday. The areas will also be reviewed regularly so that schools can reopen at the very earliest moment.

Ongoing testing for primary school staff will follow later in January, and we will be working to establish an ambitious testing programme helping to break

chains of transmission and reducing the need for self-isolation where students and staff test negative for the virus.

We have already announced our intention for a staggered return to education this term for secondary-age pupils and those in colleges.

Because the Covid infection rate is particularly high among this age group, we are going to allow more time so that every school and college is able to fully roll out mass testing of all pupils and students. I would like to thank school leaders and staff for all their ongoing work in preparing for this.

This kind of mass testing will help protect not just children and young people, it will benefit everyone in the community because it will break the chains of transmission that are making infection rates shoot up. This in turn will make it safer for more children to physically return to school.

All pupils in exam years are to return during the week beginning the 11th January, with all secondary schools and college students returning full time on the 18th January.

During the first week of term – on or after the 4th of January – secondary schools and colleges will prepare to test as many staff and students as possible, and will only be open to vulnerable children or the children of key workers.

The 1,500 military personnel committed to supporting schools and colleges will remain on task, providing virtual training and advice on establishing the testing process, with teams on standby to provide in-person support if required by schools. Testing will then begin the following week in earnest, with those who are in exam years at the head of the queue. This is in preparation for the full return of all year groups on the 18th of January in most areas.

To allow this focus on establishing testing, throughout the first week of term, exam year groups will continue to have lessons remotely in line with what they would receive in class, and only vulnerable children and children of critical workers will have face-to-face teaching.

As with primary schools, we will be applying our existing contingency framework for education in areas of the country with very high rates of Covid infection or transmission of the virus. This will require secondary schools and colleges to offer face-to-face education to only exam years, vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, with remote education being given to all other students if they are in one of those contingency frame areas.

We are also asking universities to reduce the number of students who return to campus at the start of January, prioritising student who require practical learning to gain their professional qualifications. All university students should be offered two rapid tests when they return in order to reduce the chance of spreading Covid. To support remote education and online learning during this period, the government expects to deliver more than 50,000

devices to schools across the country on 4 January alone, and over 100,000 altogether during the first week of term. This is in addition to the 560,000 devices we have already delivered as we continue aiming for a target of a total of one million devices to be distributed for children who need them the most. This programme is now being extended to include students aged 16-19 in colleges and schools.

So often Mr Speaker we have had to close things down to try and beat this awful disease but with schools our best line of attack is to keep them open using the mass-testing tools that we now have available so that we can ensure all children benefit from a first class education. As we continue to hear more encouraging news about the vaccine roll out, I am more determined than ever that children will not have to pay the price for beating Covid.

Mr Speaker I have spoken many times of my determination that we cannot let Covid damage the life chances of an entire year of children and students. With these plans which allow for rapid testing and a controlled return to schools, I am confident that we can minimise the latest health risks posed by the virus and I commend this statement to the House.

[Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine gives hope as Tier 3 and 4 measures extend to wider areas](#)

Mr Speaker, today marks a great stride forward in our plan to get us out of this pandemic and return to normal life.

Our strategy throughout has been to suppress the virus until a vaccine can make us safe. Suppressing the virus has got a whole lot harder because of the new variant – and we must take more action today.

But the vaccine is the route out of this crisis – and the approval this morning of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is another world first for Britain and it's the single biggest stride we've been able to take since the pandemic began.

It's almost exactly a year since we first heard about what we now know of as COVID-19 circulating in Wuhan in China.

Within weeks, scientists at Porton Down had sequenced the viral genome and scientists at Oxford University's Jenner Institute received the genetic code for the new virus.

Like the great British codebreakers before them, they set to work at lightning speed. We took the decision to back them from the start with

funding and access to the NHS for clinical trials and partnered with AstraZeneca, who have done a brilliant job to develop and manufacture a safe and effective vaccine at speed.

And I'm sure the whole House will join me in congratulating everyone involved in this huge British success story, which is not just a triumph of science and ingenuity – cracking a modern-day enigma code – but a victory for all.

The Oxford vaccine is affordable, can be stored at normal fridge temperature and offers hope – not just for this country – but for the whole world.

Like so much else in the pandemic response, it's been a big team effort.

While this is a great British success, it's also the British way that we are best when we collaborate with people from around the whole world. This is another example.

The vaccines programme has shown that Britain is a life-sciences super-power and the Brexit deal that this House has just passed, with a very significant majority, will help us to strengthen this yet further.

I want to thank the National Institute for Health Research, the UK Vaccines Network, the Vaccines Taskforce, AstraZeneca, Oxford University, the volunteers who stepped up for science and took part in the trial and all those involved who have made this happen

From the beginning we have focused on a vaccine as the way out of this pandemic and now it is a reality.

We need to vaccinate as quickly as supply allows – following the necessary safety checks of course – and the NHS stands ready to accelerate deployment at scale from Monday 4 January.

We have a total of 100 million doses on order, which – combined with the Pfizer vaccine – is enough to vaccinate every adult in the UK with both doses.

We will of course vaccinate according the [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation \(JCVI\) priority](#), but today's news means that everyone who wants one can get a vaccine.

We already have 530,000 doses available to the UK from Monday with millions due from AstraZeneca by the beginning of February.

Mr Speaker, the clinical advice is that the Oxford vaccine is best deployed as 2 doses, up to 12 weeks apart.

And the great news is, people get protection after the first dose. This means we can accelerate the speed at which we can vaccinate people for the first 12 weeks before we return to deliver second doses for that longer-term protection.

It brings forward the day on which we can lift the restrictions that no one

in this house wants to see any longer than are absolutely necessary.

But, Mr Speaker, we must act to suppress this virus now and the new variant makes the time between now and then even more difficult.

And whilst we have the good news of the vaccine today, we also have to take some difficult decisions

The NHS is under very significant pressure – there are over 21,000 people in hospital with coronavirus right now and we can see the impact that this is having. The threat to life from this virus is real – and the pressures on the NHS are real too.

I want to put on the record my thanks to all those working right now in the NHS and in particular, those – including our Chief Medical Officer – who have been working selflessly on the wards over Christmas.

They deserve our thanks, gratitude and support. We owe it to them to fulfil our responsibility to keep the virus under control.

Sharply rising cases – and the hospitalisations that follow – demonstrate the need to act where the virus is spreading. Yesterday alone, 53,135 cases were registered – the majority of which are believed to be the new variant.

Unfortunately, this new variant is now spreading across most of England and cases are doubling fast.

It is, therefore, necessary to apply Tier 4 measures to a wider area, including the remaining parts of the South East as well as large parts of the Midlands, the North West, the North East and the South West. I have laid a comprehensive list in the library of the House – and published on GOV.UK.

Even in most areas not moving into Tier 4, cases are rising too. It is therefore necessary to apply Tier 3 measures more broadly too including in Liverpool and North Yorkshire. The rest of Yorkshire remains in Tier 3.

These changes will take effect from one minute past midnight tomorrow morning.

The new variant means that three quarters of the population are now in Tier 4 and almost all of the country in Tiers 3 and 4.

I know that the Tier 3 and 4 measures place a significant burden on people – and especially on businesses affected. But I'm afraid it's absolutely necessary – because of the number of cases we've seen.

But where we are still able to give places greater freedoms, we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker, today is a day of mixed emotions: the joy that we have in the vaccines giving us a route out of this pandemic. Of pride, that Britain is the first country in the world, once again, to approve this British vaccine. The sorrow, at the deaths and suffering this virus has caused. And of

determination that we must all stick at it during the difficult winter weeks ahead.

We end 2020 still with great challenges, but also with great hope and confidence that in 2021 we have a brighter future ahead.

I commend this statement to the House.